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ABSTRACT

Research based text materials will probably never dominate the textbook market. To begin with, translating theory and research into practice is a chancy business. There are also creative problems such as the inherent oversimplification involved in textbook writing. Every textbook writer who has been a classroom teacher will acknowledge that such oversimplification exists, especially in areas like brainstorming, discussion, and small group work, where classroom instruction should be fluid and productively digressive. In addition, there are commercial problems. For example, publishers have an understandable stake in producing "recognizable" materials, and big changes represent financial risks to them. Nevertheless some progress is being made--the clones of Warriner and the look-alike anthologies have probably reached their peak. One sign is the National Council of Teachers of English's modest entry into the area of supplementary materials for classroom use. The experimental Student Guide Series will begin in 1985 with two theory/research based books that integrate thinking skills and English language arts. Although publishers are more or less skittish about what they see as innovative approaches, some of them will invest in the development of materials that try to represent the best knowledge about the teaching of English. (HOD)

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English Textbooks Based on Research and Theory--A Possible Dream

Charles Suhor

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English Textbooks Based on Research and Theory—A Possible Dream

Charles Suhor

I have heard some teachers say that they don't need textbooks for teaching English--especially composition and language--or that they use texts only once in a while as support for their approaches to instruction. I believe this, because I've seen such teachers in action. But they are a distinct minority. For most elementary and secondary teachers, English textbooks of all kinds are an important part of instruction. For a handful, the textbooks <u>are</u> the curriculum.

Facing that fact, I decided long ago that textbooks with a basis in theory and research can, ipso facto, play an important role in English instruction. As K-12 English supervisor in New Orleans Public Schools, I was a resource person for textbook selection committees, principals, department heads, and teachers, and I always stressed the relationships (or lack thereof) between instructional materials and theory and research. When I produced curriculum materials for the district and texts for commercial publishers, I worked doggedly for the theory/research/practice perspective.

SIGNIFICANT FLOPS

If this sounds a bit Cursader-like, be assured that the fight for better materials is often unsung, and the results are dubious at best. To begin with, translating theory and research into practice is a chancy business. Someone working from a different theoretical base or taking a different view of research is liable to see your efforts as heretical, misguided, or just plain stupid.* The Director of Curriculum in your school district or your editor at a publishing house is liable to ask, "But where are the sentence diagrams in this language program?" And if you win

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*One of the enduring anomalies of scholarship is that research communities, although dedicated to objectivity and discovery of truth in the long run, are at any given time riddled with cliques, castes, and unpleasant doctrinal quibbles. In our field, I have heard ethnographers refer to experimental researchers as asinine, and vice versa; writing process researchers dismiss sentence-combining research and pedagogy out of hand; adherents of one process approach berate adherents of another. And of course, the internecine battles among linguists, psychologists, and literary theorists are legend. In such an atmosphere, any attempt at translating research into practice is likely to run afoul of some pocket of dogma in the profession.

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those battles, the rank and file teachers might not go for your carefully developed materials. In which case, you might well have created an artistic success that sent the average teacher flying back to a grammar handbook or a fat chronological anthology.

Consider some artistic successes of the past--adventurous, research-based programs that bit the dust. James Moffett's Interaction program in 1973 for Houghton Mifflin lost a bundle of money because teachers had not read Teaching the Universe of Discourse and Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, K-13; they did not know how to orchestrate the excellent Moffett materials. Alan Purves' Responding series for Ginn in 1973, based on the state-of-the-art research in student response to literature, came out just in time for the back to basics movement. I did a book and a recording series for the Purves program that I'm really proud of; but Responding bombed. The first chapters in each book of Freeman Anderson's New Directions in English, an elementary series for Harper & Row in 1973, were imaginative attempts at teaching thinking skills. Most teachers who saw the books skipped right to the section on subjects and verbs. The profession apparently wasn't ready for thinking skills instruction at that time.

Some research-based supplementary texts have done well. Frank O'Hare's Sentencraft (Ginn 1975) and William Strong's Sentence Combining: A Composing Book (Random House, 1973) are examples. Also, there are a few materials for teachers directed specifically at interpreting theory and research into classroom practice--e.g., the ERIC/RCS TRIP booklets; certain materials cited in Recommended English Language Arts Curriculum Guides, K-12; and occasional professional books like Stanford and Roark's Human Interaction in Education (Allyn and Bacon, 1974).

PROBLEMS OF CONCEPTION AND PRODUCTION

Two recent high school composition textbook series--my own for Scholastic and Miles Olson's for Allyn and Bacon--have been developed from a base of theory and research in composition. I will describe briefly some of the things I went through in getting the series into print. There were two kinds of problems--creative and commercial. One creative problem is the inherent oversimplification involved in textbook writing. Every textbook writer who has been a classroom teacher will acknowledge that such oversimplification exists, especially in areas like brainstorming, discussion, and small group work, where classroom instruction should be fluid and productively digressive.

I tried to find authors who were inventive classroom teachers, and I challenged them to keep that invention in their text materials. The author of the 7th grade text, Carole Berlin, is a marvelous teacher who always had 15 good ideas for pre-writing activities when the textbook format could only support four or so in a given lesson. She came to the insight expressed by Jane Christensen, another teacher-writer: Textbook writing is a genre. When she learned the possibilities and limitations of incarnating a writing process approach in a textbook, she struck a fine balance between freedom and discipline. One National Writing Project teacher said of her book, "I don't use a text, but this is my basic approach, and I'd recommend the book to teachers who want one."

The problem of oversimplification is there, whether you're writing conventional materials or trying to interpret theory and research in your text. With the latter, the problem is aggravated because you are in more or less unexplored territory, faced with new possibilities and different restraints. On the positive side, the aesthetics and the challenge of the task are greater. But you are taking more risks and you have a stronger conscience about the project.

The question of risks leads to a discussion of the commercial problems. Publishers have an understandable stake in producing "recognizable" materials. Big changes represent big financial risks to them. Among the things I needed to convince my editors of were (a) teachers are ready for a process text that contains built-in small group discussion during pre-writing and peer editing; (b) sentence-combining, sans dense terminology and definitions, is a credible approach to dealing with syntax. There are strong theoretical and research bases for these assumptions, and I won the faith of the Scholastic staff--admittedly, one of the more enlightened and adventurous editorial groups, spearheaded at the time by Richard Maynard. The advice of the consultants for the series (among them, Janet Emig) was important to us, and their support for the basic approach allowed the project to go through with a minimum of "marketing decisions" about content. I felt that the final product was, at the very least, an adequate reflection of my conception. (A fuller explanation of the conceptual framework of the texts is included in my article in Problem-Solving, July 1983--"Thinking Skills in the English Language Arts.")

There were interesting reactions from the field. Carol Kuykendall's review in English Journal recognized the scholarly underpinnings of the texts. Teachers familiar with writing process approaches were comfortable with the books; other teachers just liked to work with lively materials that encouraged student writing. To my surprise, there was an even greater readiness for group work than I had anticipated. But we tended to lose out in districts that stressed subskills, sub-subskills, and testing systems that didn't include actual writing. The series has not burned up the market, but it is doing well enough to justify a revision. I'm happy to report also that the Allyn and Bacon materials are being considered for a new edition.

OUTLOOKS

Research-based materials will probably never dominate the textbook market. But the clones of Warriner and the look-alike anthologies have probably reached their peak. One excellent sign is NCTE's modest entry into the area of supplementary materials for classroom use. The experimental Student Guide Series will begin in 1985 with two theory/research-based books that integrate thinking skills and English language arts. The author teams, Dan Kirby and Carol Kuykendall (junior high/middle school text) and Gene and Barbara Stanford (senior high text), have a good track record for developing lively classroom materials. Their proposals were chosen from a group of nine, all of which outlined scholarly bases for their approaches. When the two author teams met in Urbana last winter, I witnessed a truly exciting exchange of ideas about applications of theory and research in the projected texts.

What can we conclude from all this? From my perspective, as a writer and editor, it makes sense to say that translating theory and research into practice is a more-or-less matter. It is more or less possible to do it; you will, more or less, be praised and criticized for your earnest efforts; and although publishers are more or less skittish about what they see as innovative approaches, some of them will invest in the development of materials that try to represent our best knowledge about the teaching of English.